Universities bring people, ideas and knowledge together. In this increasingly virtual world the physical environment plays a crucial role in facilitating these interactions.

The 2012 Estates Strategy had three clear aims, to develop high quality academic space; support School Plans and recreate a sense of community and place. In three years, substantial change has been achieved in all three areas by Property and Facilities, thanks to the support of colleagues and students across the University.

The building blocks of the Strategy emerged from thorough consideration of the existing estate, which had become fragmented, with some poorly used and low grade spaces.

The Estates Investment Plan set out an intensive programme of work, designed to consolidate the University in the vicinity of Northampton Square and occupy only those satellite sites with significant locational advantage.

In 2009 a Planning Brief developed with Islington Borough Council for our buildings in and around Northampton Square, was formally adopted. This document set out a blueprint for how our main campus could be developed and is referenced within Islington’s Core Strategy.

Northampton Square is a Conservation Area and our University is largely surrounded by residential properties, so this work remains important in defining the likely maximum footprint for our main buildings.
New leasehold premises were acquired and fitted out at 200 Aldersgate Street for Cass Executive Education, adding a high quality corporate dimension to our estate. We redeveloped City Law School facilities at the Innovation Centre and improved the entrance to Rhind Building, providing a generous foyer and appropriate welcome to visitors.

Meanwhile a radical and wholesale reconfiguration of our main campus was conceived. By repurposing under-used or secondary space in the basement, an underground complex of high quality lecture spaces and seminar rooms could be created, linked by daylight and vertical circulation cores from the street level two storeys above.

This was made possible by relocating areas then occupied by the School of Mathematics, Computer Science and Engineering (SMCSE) and the School of Health Sciences (SHS). The task involved a comprehensive recreation of modern, technical SMCSE labs and workshops at this level plus consolidated staff and PhD office areas at ground and first floor. SHS, at that time, were operating from nine separate buildings. We concentrated all technical facilities at Tait level 2 and brought staff together at No.1 Myddelton Street, for which we secured a 20 year lease in 2012.

The Professional Services Review created organisational change that we were able to support through a series of projects, relocating office-based staff to new or refurbished spaces off the main site. Abacus House was purchased and fitted out for Information Services, while Human Resources and Finance moved into Gloucester Building. Part of College Building basement was converted for Property and Facilities and the departments of Marketing and Communications and Development and Alumni Relations moved to Franklin Building, built on the former Finsbury Halls site together with our brand new CitySport complex.

Completed – on time and to budget

New electrical systems were installed that allow us to divert high voltage power remotely (therefore more safely) to meet business demands; chilled water and air conditioning systems were upgraded to provide centralised comfort cooling.

Control systems were extended to provide more resilient and efficient environmental control, in some areas for the first time. We improved performance by adding insulation and higher specification glazing units across our 1970’s buildings. In 2013 a new combined Cooling, Heat and Power (CCHP) engine was installed.

This sophisticated, highly efficient equipment can be used to generate heat or cooling and electrical power to offset costs and reduce our carbon footprint.

The City Estates Strategy is a great example of a document that clearly sets direction and is well supported by numbers.

Andrea Buttle, SUMS Consulting
One of the most significant transformations has been the reorganisation of our main campus to deal with important issues of accessibility, zoning of various functions and general circulation, to benefit the University and its wider community. We listened to staff, students and local residents and analysed footfall and pedestrian flows in and around our campus in order to redesign major circulation routes.

Level 1 of the main campus has been reinforced as a major student-facing area, with refreshed catering outlets and food offerings plus areas for informal meeting or social study, such as the College Common Room. CityBar was opened in autumn 2014 on Goswell Road, specifically designed to cater for a wide range of student activities. A new street entrance for the east wing of Tait Building is set to become a principal entrance for students, accessing all Union facilities including new social, study and other amenities at Level 1. This will wrap around the currently disused courtyard, bringing it back to life after years of neglect. A new staff common room will complete the north side of the courtyard.

Elsewhere we have developed new social study and group learning spaces in levels 2 and 3 of the main library and invested in additional silent study spaces.

Our main entrance is being redeveloped to form an accessible and impressive point of arrival. The design features a fully glazed perimeter to take advantage of views through to the beautiful trees of Northampton Square.

But City gets more than just a new front door – on a typical day, this entrance alone is used 16,000 times. The new scheme brings together a number of main campus circulation improvements linking our new teaching and other facilities such as new student amenity areas we will be creating on Tait Level 1.

Distinctive new copper-clad ‘pop-ups’ can now be seen on Spencer Street which bring light into the basement and give life to what was a dreary frontage. They are part of a site-wide design for our surrounding urban landscape which includes signage, street furniture and way-finding devices. The materials used were carefully selected with advice from Conservation Officers and the themes are carried through to the Ashby Street podium at Tait Building which will give access to our new Optometry clinics relocated from Bath Street.

Returning staff and students tell us that the new spaces are making a real difference to quality of experience. We are able to showcase new dimensions to our estate at every Open Day, with more in the pipeline. The results speak for themselves, as year on year new facilities are unveiled.

How City’s estate compares with the sector

HEFCE calculates a theoretical total size for each institution’s estate, based on activity. The actual size is then compared – City is one of the best performing universities in the sector on this measure. Gross space per FTE student is also recurred which confirms our lead on efficiency.

Every year utilisation surveys are carried out, with particular emphasis on our teaching stock. The data tells us that our teaching rooms are allocated for use in line with sector norms, but we continue to work with Schools to find better matches between physical space and the way we wish to teach. The new educational spaces in the main campus lower ground levels include a variety of new teaching layouts designed to provide flexible and exciting learning environments, developed with colleagues who are expert in the field of teaching and learning.

The estate is a valuable asset that underpins the financial sustainability of our business. HEFCE uses the Insurance Replacement Value (IRV) of an estate as an indication of asset value largely stripped of locational factors, in order to understand the contribution of the estate to the University bottom line. Total income per square metre is a good overall indicator of how productive our estate is – City has one of the highest results in the sector. Perhaps unsurprisingly the projected cost of bringing all condition C & D space up to condition B as a proportion of both income and IRV again sit within the best quartile for our TRAC group. Our capital investment has been both well-placed and designed with the long term in mind. Of course, the estate must be maintained in order to serve our students and staff. Our Strategic Plan incorporated a comprehensive long term replacement plan to minimise risk to the business from ageing infrastructure combined with growing numbers of people using our buildings. Major new cleaning and catering contracts (guaranteeing the London Living Wage) are delivering better standards at lower cost: together with other operational savings these have allowed us to put more resource into our front-line staff who look after our estate day and night.

The sector has seen relatively high levels of capital investment in recent years, based on central funding and a benign economic environment. The outlook is more challenging, particularly as the construction sector struggles with capacity and development cost increases remain stubbornly out of step with near deflationary general conditions.

The current Estates Plan successfully raised City’s level of investment up to HEFCE expectations (to provide a financially sustainable estate), and it is important that our new facilities benefit from carefully allocated resources.

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One of our most significant achievements is our environmental and sustainability performance. Our KPI, to achieve at least a 2:1 award in the People & Planet Green League, has been consistently exceeded and City holds Ecocampus Platinum status.

Staff and student teams across the University have engaged enthusiastically with issues rightly considered important for an institution with a high degree of social responsibility. In 2014 Green Dragons, the student-led sustainability initiative programme was shortlisted for a coveted Green Gown award, while the Green Impact scheme has shown how much can be achieved by staff working together on saving waste.

As part of the UK’s global commitment, universities were required to reduce total emissions by 43% against a 2005/06 baseline by 2020. City is on track to achieve this and sits within the top 10% of institutions for our performance to date. Our current focus is to embed sustainability in all parts of the University’s operations such as procurement, investment and curricula.

The University Carbon Reduction Target aims to achieve a minimum 2:1 Award in the influential People & Planet Green League.

City has exceeded this KPI for the last two years, gaining First Class and ranking 5th in the sector (up from 55th).
City like other institutions, faces significant challenges in delivering education and research in Central London. New development is difficult and expensive, but our estate is efficient and well placed geographically.

As we consider the short, medium and longer term outlook for our University, our physical estate and services provide the means to take advantage of our place in this great capital city.

City’s investment in spaces for students has made a really positive impact for students. The quality of food and social space in the refectory has improved greatly, societies and student groups are using the University bar for events and the lecture spaces reflect the high quality of education students are proud of at City.

*Rima Amin, Students’ Union President*